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VIKRAMADITYA

514

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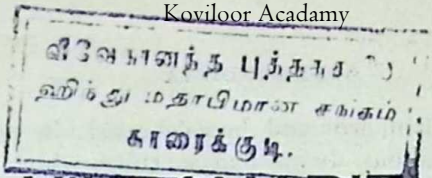

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Asoka's empire of Ahimsa did not retain its glories for long, but long after it had vanished, its moral influence remained and affected profoundly not only the destinies of India but of Asia as well. His successors were a series of weaklings, who could not prevent the gradual break-up of the Magadhan Empire, both from within and without.

The menace of foreign invasion from the north-western frontier, which the fame of Chandragupta and Asoka had kept so long in check, began to rear its head again. The Baktrian chieftains who had thrown off the overlordship of Babylon and established independent kingdoms on the borders of India, gradually began to push further southwards and succeeded in wresting some of the outer-most provinces from the Magadhan Empire. Troubles came to a head about the year 183 B. C. with a double invasion, one from the foreign tribes under Menander and another from the powerful kingdom of Kalinga, which had offered such a heroic resistance even to the invincible army of Asoka.

The statesmen at Pataliputra were much perturbed, and to add to their troubles, Pushyamitra, the Commander-in Chief of the Imperial Army, raised the banner of revolt, assumed extraordinary powers, assassinated Brihadrata, the last of the Imperial line. But he organised the resources of the Empire against the invaders. It is probable that he had the support of the Council of Ministers. Anyway, he rose to the occasion and by his undoubted military genius succeeded in routing the enemy forces.

Having thus proved his might to be the King of Kings by freeing the country from the foreign menaces, Pushyamitra

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was consecrated Emperor and he celebrated his victories by performing the famous *Asvamedha* sacrifice, which was long remembered in North India.

But after Pushyamitra, the process of decay again continued. The danger from the north-west frontier became more and more menacing. Afghanistan, Sindh and Rajputana were wrested away by the Baktrian tribes and they in their turn, were swept away by still stronger Turki tribes known as the Kushans.

The New Masters

Thus the third century after Asoka saw the Kushans installed as supreme masters of North India. It was true that Asoka's dream of an Empire of Peace had not been realised and Aryavarta was under the heels of a foreign invader. But it was a unique invasion, far different from the many later conquests that it has been the lot of this country to suffer.

Says Prof. E. B. Havell in *Aryan Rule in India* :

"Western Asia was by that time, to a very large extent Buddhist. Menander was a pious follower of the Dharma, whose sayings were recorded in Buddhist chronicles. The Sakas, the Yeuh-chi, and other Turki tribes may have been among those to whom Asoka's missionaries had carried the message of the Good Law. Certainly in Western Asia, they came under Buddhist influence, and the nearer they approached the Indus Valley, the more they threw off their nomadic habits and adapted themselves to the settled life of the Aryan civilisation.

No Conquests for Rapine

"Thus many of them must have entered India, not as barbarous conquerors, bent only on rapine or plunder, but as disciples of the Sakya Prince pressing forward to the holy

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land, as the Crusaders fought their way to the birth-place of the Prince of Peace, at Bethlehem.

"Takshasila and Mathura, whether under Baktrian, Scythian, Parthian or Turki rule, continued to be seats of Buddhist learning to which students from Western Asia and from China came in great numbers. And as the organization of the Buddhist Church was Indo-Aryan, based upon the democratic tradition of the village community, the establishment of the Baktrian or Turki Buddhist dynasties on Indian soil did not mean the break-up or the profound disturbance of Indo-Aryan Society....."

"Buddhism did not, as Asoka hoped," he adds, "prevent war; but it profoundly affected the psychology of Asia and made India what it has remained to the present day—the most religious country in the world."

And the Kushan supremacy was not without its advantages. "As the centre of Buddhist culture it brought law and order on the border land of India and formed a half-way house between India and Rome on the one side, and India and China on the other. Politically it was strong enough to protect India for the time being from adventurous raids either from the west or the east. And the Mongolian connection of the Kushan people gave an immense impetus to Buddhist propaganda in China and at the same time, the Hellenistic culture of western Asia imbibed the Buddhistic idealism which so deeply impressed the ritual and folklore of Christianity."

The Kushan supremacy not only extended to a great part of North India; over a large part of Central Asia also it held sway. The modern provinces of Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan to the north of Himalayas and in the west, the large tracts of land extending to the borders of Persia came under

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the Kushan banner, and Purushapura, the modern Peshawar, became its capital.

Kanishka's Empire

The best known of the Kushan emperors is Kanishka whose fame was as great as that of Asoka. He was a great military leader and like Asoka, was a devoted Buddhist who sent missions to foreign lands. He is also credited with convening a great General Assembly of learned monks to settle the disputes which had sprung up among the various Buddhist sects. Over five hundred leaders of the Buddhist Church met in a monastery in Kundalavana, in Kashmir, on "royal invitation," and made an exhaustive examination of Buddhist Sacred Books. The canons of the faith as formulated by them were inscribed in copper plates, and deposited in a special *stupa* built by the Emperor near Srinagar. Unfortunately, the site of the *stupa* has not been found out till now.

Here it is necessary to refer to the great schism in the Buddhist Church that occured after Asoka. For, it had far-reaching effects not only on the development of Indo-Aryan ideas but on the history of India as well.

The simple teachings of the Buddha, became enshrouded in a vast horde of crude legends. The great organization of the Sangha tended to become unweildy. The over-zealous followers of the Prince of Ahimsa installed him as a divinity, and provided him with a host of lesser gods. Two great schools of thought were formed, one the *Mahayana* or the great vehicle which accepted the divinity of the Buddha as a cardinal, orthodox belief, and the *Hinayana*, or lesser vehicle, which followed the earlier canons of Buddhism. And while *Mahayana*, the popular school, flourished in North India under the powerful patronage of the Imperial Kushans, *Hinayana* found a strong and peaceful home in the independent kingdoms of the South.

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The split was on a parallel with the Protestant revolt against Papacy in Mediaeval Europe. And it was in Kanishka's reign that Nagarjuna, hailed as the Luther of Buddhism, flourished and preached his *bhakti-margha*, which "aimed at finding means of expression for the deep-seated religious instincts of the masses through the way of devotion to the Divine Teacher, rather than through the dry agnostic philosophy of the *Hinayana* schools."

Smothered in Bed

But though a devout follower of the Eight-fold Path, Kanishka did not, as the great Asoka before him, renounce war. He was possessed of an insatiable lust for power and his aggressive wars soon disgusted the people. According to popular traditions, his end was cruel; he was smothered in his bed with a quilt during an illness. This is one of the "many recorded instances of the fate which overtook Indian sovereigns who offended against the traditions of Indo-Aryan Constitutional Government."

But on the whole, the Kushans kept themselves within the constitutional bounds of Aryan law. Both in religion and in principles of Government," remarks a British historian, "the Turki monarchs were, like the greatest of the Moghul dynasty, thoroughly Aryanised and could not therefore have regarded themselves as despotic and irresponsible rulers of a conquered people. And to this cause, the historian should not hesitate to ascribe the fact that Kanishka's line maintained an unbroken supremacy in Northern India for nearly three centuries."

It was during the period of Kushan supremacy too, that the intercourse between India and the outside world reached its peak. Silks and diamonds, pearls and spices were sent out from the flourshing sea-ports of South India to the Roman cities, and the development of the maritime trade of India

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brought her into close touch with Burma, Siam, Java and Combodia, where Indo-Aryan culture obtained a strong footing.

New Fight for Freedom

When the Kushan power began to decay, the ingrained spirit of independence of the race was aroused and the banner of revolt was raised. Though confirming, in outward forms at least, to Aryan traditions, the Kushan domination could not but be repulsive to the liberty-loving leaders of Aryan aristocracy. And the inspiration came from the republican clans of the Punjab, whose leaders were closely connected with the Imperial Mauryas. In 308 A. D., the Raja of Pataliputra, bearing the proud name of Chandragupta, sent the fiery cross as it were, round the country to wage a holy war in defence of Aryavarta. The response was immediate. Chandragupta had married Kumaradevi, a princess of the Licchavi tribe, and their warrior chieftains came to his aid as they had done six and a half centuries before in answering the first Maurya's call to arms against the foreign aggressors.

And Chandragupta followed the same principle of consolidating Aryavarta under one powerful umbrella as his illustrious namesake had done before. For, it was one of the cardinal points of Aryan polity, since justified by history, that only a strong central Government could successfuly resist the standing menace from the north-western gaps of the Himalayan wall.

" His first effort was to put an end to the turmoil into which Aryavarta had fallen, by asserting the right of Government exercised by the Aryan fighting class from time immemorial. It was a right which was necessarily maintained by the sword, though founded upon the principles of justice and consideration for the general good, which were accepted by the whole Aryan community and embodied in the codes of

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Indo-Aryan law, which every Kshatriya prince learned by heart and was taught to regard as the canonical laws of his caste. A war conducted on these principles could never be a brutal war of spoliation or extermination. It was rather the upholding of the strong arm of universal law by Vishnu's vice-regent on earth and the assertion of the principle that right is might."

The Golden Age

Within twelve years of the proclamation of the holy war, Chandragupta succeeded in bringing the whole of North India under Aryan rule. The kingdoms under foreign dynasties were conquered by the sword, while Aryan chiefs were but too glad to conclude alliances with the Imperial Guptas. And in 320 A. D., Chandragupta was crowned King of Kings and celebrated the event by striking coins in his own name and also that of his queen, Kumaradevi, and of the Licchavi clan which assisted him so heroically. This year also marked the beginning of the Gupta era.

Chandragupta was fortunate in his successors.

Samudragupta, his son and heir, who improved upon his splendid victories made Ayodhya his capital. From there, he began a still greater campaign, leading his mighty army even as far south as Conjeevaram. The sacrificial horse went in front and the monarchs who extended a friendly greeting were taken as allies while those who opposed him were defeated by force of arms. He returned triumphant through the western districts of the Dekkan and performed the *Asvamedha* sacrifice amidst great pomp and splendour. It is interesting here to note that the powerful Tamil kingdoms of the South and even of Ceylon were recognized as Aryan, and the Gupta Emperor scrupulously refrained from any aggressive act or designing manoeuvres against their independence.

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Meghavarna, the King of Ceylon, sent a special mission with costly gifts to Samudragupta's Court. And the Gupta Emperor not only allowed but gladly helped to fulfil the Ceylon King's desire to build a richly endowed monastery near the Bodhi Tree at Gaya for Singhalese students and pilgrims. That one fact is enough to disprove that the triumph of "Brahminical reaction,"—one of the favourite fictions of western writers to distort Indian history—was not inspired by any narrow, sectarian feelings.

Vikramaditya

Samudragupta's son, Chandragupta II, better known as Vikramaditya, proved himself even greater than his father and grand-father. He embarked on a series of brilliant military campaigns and the Punjab and Bengal whose chiefs showed signs of revolt, were once again brought under control. He pushed his empire further west and conquered Malwa and Gujerat. His most creditable achievement was the regaining of the Kathiawar peninsula, where the Sakas, a tribe of Turki origin, had strongly entrenched themselves for many centuries.

Vikramaditya transferred his capital to the centre of the Saka kingdom and in Ujjain, the historical city where Asoka had ruled in his younger days as the Viceroy of his father, all the splendour of the Aryan Court was once again revived.

The Gupta period was indeed the Golden Age of Hinduism. The heroic exploits of Vikramaditya, his lavish patronage to art and literature and his impartial administration of justice, are treasured in popular legends throughout India to the present day. In the Imperial Court of Ujjain were foregathered all the great scholars of Sanskrit, all the great leaders of art and music, and all the great poets of Aryavarta. It became famous for its great university, and it is interesting

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to note that a great astronomical laboratory flourished in Ujjain, centuries before Gallileo began to scan the starry heavens with his crude telescope. Tradition places Kalidasa, the famous dramatist, in this glorious age.

By far the most valuable historical data of the Golden Age of India are preserved in the accounts left by Fa-Hein, the Chinese traveller who came to India in search of *Vinaya Pitaka*, an authoritative Buddhist text.

Though the Government was highly organised, Fa-Hein says that the people were singularly free from bureaucratic tyranny. "They have not to register their households," he writes, "or attend to any magistrates and rules." The whole country was prosperous. State revenue was mainly derived from the rents of Royal domains. The chief officers of the King had fixed incomes and so were not tempted to extort money from the people.

From his accounts we also learn that the people at Patali-putra were rich, prosperous, and virtuous. And in addition to State hospitals, Fa-Hien found that the rich merchants and land-owners had also endowed free hospitals inside the city, to which were admitted poor and helpless patients suffering from all kinds of infirmities.

"They are well cared for, and a doctor attends to them, food and medicine being supplied according to their wants.

"Thus they are made quite comfortable, and when they are well, they may go away."

No Death Penalty

The administration of justice was also mild—even milder than in Mauryan days. Most of the crimes were punishable with fines only, and the supreme penalty of death was never inflicted. But in cases of repeated incitements to disorder and rebellion, the right hand of the culprit was cut off.

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The glories of the Buddhist Sangha had vanished by that time. But Fa-Hien never alludes even slightly, to any persecution of Buddhists. Not only did Hinduism and Buddhism flourish side by side, but the two great sects of Buddhism also got on without any discord. "Both the great and little vehicles flourished at Pataliputra and if any sectarian rancour existed, Fa-Hien did not observe it."

The Sacred places of Buddhism which were great centres of pilgrimage in the days of Asoka had become depopulated villages when Fa-Hien came on his pilgrimage. But the Buddhist Church flourished all the same. Neither the Hindu rulers, nor any of their powerful Brahmin advisers attempted at any moment to deprive the Buddhist monasteries of their rich endowments. On the contrary, Fa-Hien records that they scrupulously refrained from interfering with their funds, or properties. The monks, residing in Sangharamas, he records, had chambers, beds, coverlets, food, drink and clothes provided for them without stint or reserve. "And thus it is in all places," he adds emphatically.

Rich and magnificent, these abodes of Buddhist learning were littered throughout the country in the midst of luxurious groves and gardens, giving shelter to every wanderer, and light to every seeker of truth.

No Sectarian Bans

This humanitarian work of service was not merely confined to the followers of the Buddha. Even "heretical sects," records Fa-Hien, had built *Darmasalas* along the roads where travellers found shelter, food and drink, and were supplied with all necessities. And in these, even the Buddhist pilgrims were entertained at public expense, though separate provision was made for them.

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As for the people, Fa-Hien testifies that they were honest, kind, and hospitable. In fact, his sole remaining companion from China, Tao Chang, was so much "impressed by the strict decorum and religious deportment of the monks of Magadha, even in the midst of worldly influences—which he contrasted with the lax discipline and ignorance of the Law shown by the monks of his own country—that he resolved to remain in India, until in some future birth he should reach *nirvana*."

After a vain search of many years, Fa-Hien found the sacred texts in Pataliputra, where he stayed three years to learn Sanskrit so as to copy them. In the whole of North India, Fa-Hien explains, the learned masters of the Law trusted entirely to oral tradition handed down from one genetion of scholars to another, and no written copies of the Master's precepts were found.

"Now that it is so common to impose literary shibboleths as final tests of culture and political capacity," says Professor Havell, in this connection, "it is interesting to observe that at a time when India had reached the zenith of her creative powers in arts and letters, a position at least as high as that reached by any modern State and had achieved a system of Self-Government probably as perfect as the world has yet known—if the highest standard of political ethics and the general happiness of the community be accepted as the criteria—she found it not only unnecessary but undesirable to make book-learning a test either of literary culture or of political capacity. In the Golden Age of Indian literature, writing was a mercantile accomplishment rather than an intellectual one; and the highest intellect of the land preferred an oral method of education as more exact and more mentally efficient than that of text books. But in the days when machinery has become all-powerful, even our menta-

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lity must be machine-made, lest we should go too slowly in the mad race for world markets and world-power."

The Mahabharata

The Indian national Renaissance which was inaugurated by the Guptas, not only saw the flowering of such famous poets as Kalidasa but also revived the ancient epics of Aryavarta. Brahman *gurus* came out of their forest hermittages, and took popular education from the hands of the Buddhist Sanga. The Mahabharata is believed to have been revised at this time. And henceforth, that became the sole repository of every kind of learning. It served not only as the moral code of an ordered society to the people at large, but also contained the essence of Kshatriya polity, philosophy, and religious doctrine.

And the *Bhagavat Gita*, the celestial "Song of the Blessed One" became once again the text-book of the Kshatriya youth. "It was a call to the Aryan youth to fulfil their religious duties by warlike deeds, rather than by meditation in the seclusion of the monastery. Krishna, the military leader and man of action, who had delivered his people from the tyrant's yoke, and destroyed the demons who were ravaging the land, would point the way to *mukti* for every one by simple devotion to duty, instead of Gautama, the Sakya ascetic, whose pietism would emasculate the manhood of Aryavarta in the monastic cell."

And these celestial words: "He that performeth a dutiful action, independently of the fruit of action, he is an ascetic, he is a yogi," became the text for the youth of Aryavarta.

And when the Gupta Emperor asked his learned pandits to edit the Mahabharata, it was not merely the act of a patron of literature. With an amazing far-sightedness and

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actuated with a supreme nationalism, he saw in it a powerful and undying dynamo of national aspirations.

As Sister Nivedita puts it beatuifully in her *Footfalls of Indian History*, there are two outstanding features of the *Mahabharata*—"its unity in complexity and its constant effort to impress on its hearers the idea of a single centralised India with a heroic tradition of her own as the formative and uniting impulse."

"It is, in good sooth, a monarch's dream of an imperial race," she says. "The Gupta Emperor of Pataliputra who commissioned the last recension of the great work was as conscious as Asoka before him, or Akbar after, of making to his people the magic statement: *India is One.*"

No Lust for Conquest

And it was one of the glories of the Gupta emperors, one of the unique incidents in world's history, that when they were at the height of their power, when they were undisputed masters of the whole of this vast sub-continent, they never thought of any foreign wars of conquest or aggression. It was a cardinal principle of Indo-Aryan polity, never to embark on wars of conquest—that is, outside the boundaries of Bharatavarsha. Not that they had no chance. They had it in plenty, and the world conditions actually favoured such conquest.

"Even the great war-lords, Samudragupta and Vikramaditya," admits a British historian, "with the most powerful armies and navies at their command, and with almost unlimited opportunities, at a time when the Roman Empire was tottering to its fall, were content to limit their title of world-sovereignty to the confines of Aryavarta, and the people who came within the Aryan pale. The great wealth of India's natural resources and its geographical unity might seem to make the temptation less than it would be under

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other conditions, but such conditions, as a rule, only tend to inflame the lust for power of would-be world conquerors."

It is one of the most unique lessons of Indian history, that not one of her great sons should have desired world-conquest and world-power. They wanted to rob no land, they wanted to trample on no people. Had he but the slightest wish, Vikramaditya could have marched and stormed the walls of Imperial Rome, and blotted the pages of history with an invasion far mightier and with victories far more glorious than of an Alexander. But he refrained. And that glorious act of renunciation makes him one of the greatest monarchs of history,—as great as Asoka, yet another leader in world's history who renounced warfare after victory.

R. G.